

*If I never see you again, Seeker, it'll be too soon.* Jane glared at the arrogantly grinning blonde man lounging on her sofa and was a little surprised at the vehemence of the thought. Since reluctantly – desperately – joining the Janissaries two years ago, Jane had worked with Seeker several times, as their skills were complementary. She was the stealth, and he was the muscle – and then some. Despite her personal dislike of Seeker's arrogant, self-centered overconfidence, she had to admit that she had never met – or even heard of – another nova who could take such punishment as he did. It was what he dealt out that she objected to. And that was why they were talking now, in Jane's empty house.

Seeker looked around the empty room, clearly curious. A battered sofa, a heavy hand-carved coffee table and half-a dozen empty soda cans were the total contents of the room and, in fact, the entire house. "Going for the minimalist look, Widow?"

*That name is going to be another thing I'm not going to miss.* Jane had to pick a working name in a hurry and Black Widow – the first thing that came to mind – had unfortunately stuck. Admittedly, the name fit – if the wall-crawling and poisonous tendencies weren't enough, Jane's back had developed a distinctive hour-glass shaped mark about six months after her eruption. But she tried to keep that to herself - such a distinctive feature was the kind of thing that could lead to unwanted company, no matter which face she wore.

Jane glanced idly at the empty room. "Pretty much," she replied shortly, not wanting to let Seeker know that she was shutting the house down. Most of her furniture had already been sold or given away and the few items that she couldn't part with had been sent to a discreet storage facility in the United Kingdom. Jane wasn't sure of where she was going next, but was dead-set on leaving the Middle East.

"All right," Seeker shrugged, clearly not caring. "You said you wanted to talk," he stated, referring to Jane's reluctant request that Seeker pay her a visit. "Are you going to tell me why you lost your fucking mind last month?"

Jane winced and hoped that Seeker would assume her irritation was self-directed. "Yes," she admitted. "I figured you deserved an explanation-"

The door exploded inwards, scattering splinters across the room. Five novas – Jane had to assume that anyone who could move that quickly *had* to be a nova – spilled into the room. Besides, only novas would have the balls to kick in the *front* door on a raid. They immediately got to work, that work being Widow and Seeker.

They clearly knew what they were doing. Three of them immediately targeted Seeker, leaving the other two to deal with her. Jane had to agree that Seeker was easily the more dangerous – and difficult to apprehend – of the two. Whilst she struggled with a wiry teenager who seemed to agree with her notion that walls can always be rebuilt - as he shoved her through one – she caught a glimpse of her opponent's ingenious strategy.

Seeker prided himself on being able to fight like a wildcat against overwhelming odds – fight and win. His strength was prodigious, as was his stamina, and his ability to regenerate. On the surface of it, the notion of taking him down by physical force alone struck Jane as a foolish idea. But she had forgotten to consider the ingenuity of her fellow novas. They knew better than to send weaklings against the infamous Elite.

A dark-haired woman tackled Seeker, ignored the fierce bite that missed her eye by an inch, gouging a chunk from her cheek. Once she had him in hand, she changed from a being of flesh to a living liquid and wrapped around Seeker's head and torso. *Unpleasant*, Jane thought, *but effective*. Seeker didn't go down easily. Jane couldn't help sparing a sympathetic thought for the body-shifting nova. *How does it feel to drown someone with your own body?*

“Regenerate *that*, asshole.” Jane heard someone mutter as she took a terrific blow to the head. Sliding out of consciousness, Mallory couldn’t help remembering how this trouble began...

“You again?” Seeker flopped down onto a leather sofa, apparently unheeding of the protesting squeak of springs. Even the sturdiest furniture didn’t take well to two hundred pounds of muscle falling into it.

“Yeah. Me. Again.” Jane realized that her lack of enthusiasm for her partner was mutual. *Who comes up with these assignments?*

Smith’s gaze darted between the pair, but otherwise remained calm. “Glad you could join us, Seeker.” He commented dryly. “As you’ve so keenly observed, you’re going to be working with Widow on this one.” Jane suppressed her customary wince at that name.

Seeker shrugged. “No skin off my nose,” he replied casually. “As long as she stays scared of me, that’s fine.”

Jane suppressed a scowl at being so easily read. *One day, you’re going to get a cold, and maybe then I’ll be able to get something past you.* Seeker’s super-sensitivity to pheromones made him almost impossible to fool.

Turning her attention to Smith – *odd choice for a code name, that* – she asked. “So, what’s the job, this time?”

“The World Bank is having a meeting with OPEC in Riyadh,” Smith began. “A *confidential* meeting.” He added with heavy emphasis. “It seems that the World Bank wants OPEC to wake up, smell the coffee and drop their prices by at least five dollars per barrel.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “That’s going to go over like a pork chop dinner.” She murmured. Thanks to the advances of Project Utopia, OPEC was already reeling, with oil prices half of what they were ten years ago.

“Precisely,” Smith agreed. “The powers that be in Riyadh have decided that they don’t want to budge, and they want to make that point *crystal* clear to their esteemed visitor.”

“An intimidation job?” Seeker scoffed. “OPEC’s hiring a nova team to give some pencil-necked geek a new set of knees? Way to overkill.” Still, his eyes glittered. Work was work, and Seeker *loved* his work – a little too much, in fact.

Smith dismissed Seeker’s comments with a wave of the hand. “Granted, you might think they would have considered more affordable options, but let’s not look a gift horse in the mouth. I’ve prepared dossiers for both of you. The gentleman from the World Bank, a Mister Farrand, will be arriving in three days’ time...”

The safe-house in Riyadh was a typical example of the type. A little too small, the furniture entirely anonymous, and the air-conditioning couldn’t quite keep up with the environment. The blazing sunshine wasn’t too warm – winters in Saudi Arabia were bearable – but the past few days had been windless, so the house was stuffy as well as dusty. Jane ignored it, as did Seeker. They were working, and they could ignore all but the worst environments.

“Given that Farrand’s usually got a couple of goons with him, and we’re supposed to be oh-so-discreet,” Seeker’s scornful tone described what he thought of that policy, “I guess we’ll have to go at him through his son.”

“Great, kids again.” Jane grumbled, not bothering to hide her irritation.

“Come on, Widow, you’re not still sore about that last job, are you?” Seeker’s irreverence did nothing to lighten Jane’s mood.

There was no point in lying. “As a matter of fact, I am.” She replied curtly. “There are some things that shouldn’t be done – not even by you.”

Seeker laughed. “I wasn’t *really* going to do it,” he insisted. “And if you hadn’t had that attack of morals in the middle of it, things would have gone a lot more smoothly.”

*Bullshit*, Jane thought angrily. *You were ready to rape a twelve-year-old girl to get her father to talk, and you were pissed at me for stopping you. I know all about your ideas of ‘fun’-pain and mayhem all ‘round...* It was the primary reason that Jane – and most of the Janissaries – disliked working with Seeker. Seeker’s extraordinary abilities enabled him to hold on to employment when any other nova would have been fired – or killed.

“Fine, don’t believe me.” He shrugged.

Jane sighed. Conversation *and* subterfuge were impossible with this man. Once again, she wondered who at HQ kept thinking that Seeker could work with *anyone*.

*Stay focused, Jane.* “So, his son?” She began.

“Yeah, Scott,” he replied briskly. Seeker did have *some* professionalism. “He might have a guard too, but the odds are more likely to be on our side. Farrand doesn’t usually take his boy with him, but I guess Daddy didn’t want to leave junior all alone. Sixteen year old boys and absentee parents don’t mix, go figure.”

Jane nodded. That made sense. “So we do some reconnaissance when he hits town tomorrow? Size the situation up?”

Seeker nodded. “If it looks like the boy’s left to his own devices, you can just do yourself up as stacked cheerleader-type and lure him in. Blonde,” Seeker grinned. “I like blondes.” Jane’s default visage at the moment was designed to blend in with the locals – dusky skin, thick black hair framing a round face and brown eyes.

Jane ignored the barb. “We’ll have to move fast,” she thought. “Try to grab him as soon as he gets on the ground.” Although Jane found the idea distasteful, she was under contract to do a job and she wasn’t going to break her word.

“Pretty much. Farrand’s going to move into that meeting pretty quick – get in, get it done and get gone. Sounds like us.” Seeker chortled.

Jane ignored the comment. “We’ve got his flight information. I can start tracking him as soon as he gets off the plane...”

“Nice bit of work, that,” Seeker conceded, looking at the unconscious boy on the bed. “I didn’t think we could grab him that fast. Then again, that was a mind-scrambling body you had on. Wear it for me some time?” he teased.

“Not on your life,” Jane replied dryly, her gaze fixed on the young man. He seemed familiar, and she couldn’t leave the thought alone. His features weren’t particularly distinctive – dark brown hair in some shaggy teenaged style framing a long face with a straight nose. *He’ll be a handsome guy, if he grows up*, Jane thought absently.

Seeker noticed her concentration. “Hey there, Widow, don’t be getting the hots for him.” He leered. “Young Scott there is half your age.”

“Not quite,” Jane replied absently, and then she shook her head to clear it. “Sorry,” she half-apologized. “He just reminds me of someone, I think.” *Just one of those faces that everyone finds familiar, maybe?*

“No worries,” Indeed, Seeker really didn’t care about anything on Jane’s mind that didn’t directly impact their mission.

Jane left the bound boy where he lay, headed into the austere living room. “You’re the intimidator,” she pronounced. “Go to Farrand and scare him. It’s past midnight, now, so he should be pretty frantic - and tired.”

“Sure thing. Sure you don’t want to join in?”

“Quite sure, thanks.” *I’m sure you’ll enjoy yourself sufficiently for the both of us*, she thought sourly.

“Pass me that Polaroid.” Seeker muttered. “I’ll have to take a few pictures to prove that we’ve got his boy...”

Jane silently stepped into the scantily-furnished bedroom which held Scott Farrand. That nagging sense of familiarity still bothered Jane as she regarded the teenager.

“Is someone there?” he called out, quietly. *Impressive*, Jane thought. *I doubt most baselines would have heard me come in.*

Jane decided to keep to the voice Scott knew her by – young and slightly Californian. “Yeah. Uh, I’m sorry about this,” she half apologized. “But you’re going to be alright.” *Providing your father plays along.* “Do you want something to drink? I can offer you water or Pepsi.” She neglected to mention that his choice would be laden with sedatives. The house was detached and distant from its closest neighbors, but Widow saw nothing against stacking the odds in her favor.

Scott nodded, turning his blindfolded face towards her. “Water would be great.” He was trying hard to keep the fear out of his voice. To his credit, he almost succeeded. *That voice*, Jane concentrated. *He sounds like someone I met, but who?*

“I’ll get it for you. I would tell you to sit tight,” Jane said dryly. “But that would be pointless.” Unsurprisingly, Scott didn’t see the humor in that.

Jane fetched a plastic cup of water from the prepared pitcher in the refrigerator, dropped a plastic straw into it and returned to the boy’s room. She watched him closely as he sipped at the cold liquid. *Ron*, she realized. *He looks like Ron.* Jane shook her head, fighting down a sudden surge of unwanted emotion. She hadn’t thought of Ron for a long time. Years. There was no reason to, really. *It’s not like he stuck around after knocking me up – nor did I give him much of a chance to do so.*

*Scott’s sixteen*, she thought. *How old would my son be? Fifteen? Maybe sixteen?* Jane scowled irritably. *This is not the time to make foolish suppositions*, she berated herself. Still, the resemblance was striking, now that she was looking for it. That long face reminded her of the cheerful baseball player she knew in high-school. That wide mouth, too – although the hair would have had to have come from her – Ron was blonde. Jane tried to remember the color of Scott’s eyes – were they blue, or hazel?

*The dossier didn’t mention if Scott is Farrand’s natural son – but an adoption can be hidden half a dozen ways. And I gave my baby up to a closed adoption, so there’s no easy way for me to find out where he went – not without attracting way too much attention to my old self.*

She shook her head, angrily. *Get a grip, Jane. This isn’t your son. Now get back to work.* Scott was already drowsing on the bed, his chin resting upon his chest. Jane rearranged him a bit. *No point in letting him get a crick in his neck, being kidnapped is bad enough, right?*

“Shit,” she muttered, turning out the light as she left the room. Clearly the long hours of the past couple of days were making her vulnerable to flights of fancy. *Yes, that must be it.*

“He’s going to be a tougher nut than I expected,” Seeker’s voice contained a hint of reluctant admiration. “He doesn’t like the sitch, but he told me to take my ‘suggestions’ and shove ‘em.”

“Really?” Jane’s surprise was evident. “So, what next? He’s supposed to be meeting with OPEC in, what, four hours?”

Seeker nodded. “So now we go to the next stage.” He glanced at Jane, sensing her disquiet. “Oh, quit being such a girl,” he sneered. “I won’t hurt him, much – unless you want to impersonate him and I’ll cut off one of *your* fingers?”

Jane opened her mouth to brush him off, and then paused, clearly considering the idea.

Seeker chuckled “You’re such a babe in the woods, Widow.” He grinned. “You’re gonna have to get over that attitude.”

*No, I’m going to have to get away from scum like you,* she thought fiercely. *But, for the moment...*

Jane’s features blurred to match those of the kidnapped boy in the next room, while she smoothly tossed the nearby Polaroid camera to Seeker, which he caught with a reflexive action. A moment later, she extricated a sturdy bread-knife from a nearby drawer and cut off the smallest finger on her left hand before Seeker could object any further. *Although I doubt he would,* Jane realized bitterly.

“Take a picture, Seeker,” Jane told him, her voice tight with discomfort.

Seeker left the camera untouched. *Trust Seeker to be awkward,* Jane thought irritably, despite the little voice in her mind that mentioned that it was she who was being awkward. “Christ, Widow, what are you doing?” he asked her, incredulous.

“I can grow this back,” she said evenly – *although I’m not sure how long that will take.* “The kid can’t. Why traumatize the kid?”

Seeker’s usual attitude re-asserted itself. “Oh, jeeze, Widow, maybe because that’s the whole fucking point of this exercise?”

“No!” Jane snapped, sick of trying to keep her temper. “The *point* of this assignment is to get Farrand to crack – what does it matter to you if we use his kid or a duplicate?”

Seeker shook his head, bemused and not understanding Jane’s discomfort. “You’ve got some screwed-up priorities,” he sighed. “Even if you can grow it back, I don’t see the point in that.” He nodded towards the shred of flesh lying on the kitchen counter.

“And that’s the difference between me and you,” Jane muttered as she fumbled under the sink for the first-aid kit that she knew was there. She was damned if she was going to disclose the real reason for her upset.

Seeker didn’t appreciate criticism, real or implied. “Maybe it’s time for you to reconsider your career path, Widow,” he suggested darkly.

Jane shrugged listlessly. “Maybe.” She really didn’t want to fight with Seeker about this, but she realized that maybe he had a point. *I used to be one of the good guys,* she thought wearily, remembering her time with the FBI. *Perhaps I’m not cut out for this blood-and guts work.* She suppressed a wry smile. *I should have thought of that before I choked a guy with my tongue, maybe?* To her surprise, she realized the memory of her first cold-blooded murder no longer bothered her – but that lack of guilt was perhaps a source of new worry. *Not now,* Jane told herself firmly. *Think about this later.*

“You’ve still got some learning to do – and the curve’s *real* steep.” Jane didn’t like the oily smirk on Seeker’s face as he picked up the Polaroid. *Anything that makes him that happy, has got to be bad,* Jane realized.

“What do you-“ Jane stopped as Seeker turned away from her, still smiling, and headed towards Scott’s room. Her stomach lurching, Jane realized that Seeker still intended to do *something* unpleasant. “Oh no you don’t,” she muttered, moving quickly to catch up with her partner.

Unfortunately, she had forgotten to account for Seeker’s own abilities and he easily stopped her progress – and threw her across the kitchen – with an apparently casual swipe of his arm. She scrambled to her feet and caught up with him just as he entered the back room. Now she could see the utility knife in Seeker’s other hand – although she glimpsed it only for a moment as he sent her reeling with another deceptively casual blow. A haze of dizziness smothered Jane’s rising disgust as she struggled to stay on her feet with only partial success.

By the time Jane’s head cleared, Seeker had returned to the kitchen, whistling tunelessly and clutching a new Polaroid picture and another shred of flesh in his hand.

“And what was the point of *that*?” Jane demanded, frustration sickening her.

“Why, Widow dear, I’m just trying to teach you the pointlessness of sentimentality.” He spoke with false sweetness. “It’s a useless emotion, as you have just learned.”

*The only useless thing around here is this partnership*, Jane thought fiercely. Reluctantly, she realized that she had failed to take Seeker’s twisted ideas of fun into account before lapsing into altruism.

“Fine,” she muttered. “Point taken.”

Seeker regarded her carefully, wondering if the object lesson had struck home, but then deciding to pursue the matter another time. “Good,” he nodded. “I’m off to go see Daddy. If this doesn’t shift him, well...” Seeker smiled. “I’ll have to cut off something else.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Jane sighed.

Seeker considered the question carefully and then shrugged. “Yeah, although it’s better when they’re awake.” He grinned, deliberately needling his companion.

Jane ignored the barb. “I should have known.” She waved towards the front door. “Go on then, get out of here.” *I’ve got some thinking to do*, she realized. *And I don’t need you hanging around here, asking questions. I’m done with you, Seeker, but I’m going to teach you a lesson of my own before I go...*

...Her return to consciousness was instantaneous. No muzzy groping this time, which Jane considered a bit of a relief. Those moments of *who am I* were often embarrassing, as well as time-consuming.

Flat on her back in the remnants of her kitchen, Jane opened her eyes to see one of her assailants, a nova she knew as Vulpin standing over her, an apologetic smile on his face. “I’m sorry about that,” the young man said to her. “I don’t know my own strength some times. But you *did* say to make it convincing.”

Jane sat up carefully. “It’s okay,” she coughed a bit at the dusty air, then winced at the all-too-familiar ache in her ribs. Still, it was sheer luck that Vulpin hadn’t cracked her skull, too. “You certainly convinced me.” She admitted. “Did you bag Seeker?”

“No problem.” Celestine – a short man with an unmistakable air of confidence that marked him as the leader of the group - stepped through the newly-made entryway into the kitchen. “We always believed that once he was unconscious, Seeker would be easy to contain. The trick lay in knocking him out in the first place. I’ve never known a nova who could shrug off damage so easily.” He grinned, rubbing his knuckles theatrically.

“True that,” she agreed, as she accepted Vulpin’s assistance as she got up. “I wish I could do the same.” Wincing again, she realized that she had cracked a collarbone too. Still, it was nothing a couple of day’s rest wouldn’t fix. And it was a small price to pay, really, for getting Seeker into captivity.

“Tsunami, Epsilon and Jitter are packing him up for transport.” Celestine told his companion. “I told them that we would catch up with them at headquarters.” Vulpin nodded.

The group leader turned to Mallory. “What about you? We owe you one for giving us a chance to get our hands on this guy. Is there anything we can do for you?”

Jane shook her head, “The pleasure was all mine, I assure you. If you guys cut him into pieces small enough to hide, it won’t be anything less than he deserves.”

Celestine regarded Jane frankly. “Are you still sure you don’t want to join up with us?” It was a repetition of an offer he had made several times in the past four months since Jane made his acquaintance during a vacation in Cairo.

Jane nodded. “Quite sure, thanks. Besides,” she smiled wryly. “You couldn’t ever be sure I wouldn’t sell you out in a moment of pique.”

Celestine’s friendly expression faded. “I would like to think that I wouldn’t provoke anyone that far.” He demurred. “I doubt you’re the only one Seeker pushed – he just pushed you too far.”

“Amen,” Jane muttered, her mind already on the long list of things she was going to have to do once she left London. *I wonder if that contact in Montreal is still valid? Can I dare a trip so close to the States?*

The awkward silence lengthened. Finally, Vulpin spoke. “At least let us drop you somewhere,” he offered. He was a little embarrassed at the notion of leaving Jane in the rubble of her old house after she had gone out of their way to give them something they wanted.

Jane refused the offer. “No, it’s too likely that Seeker might smell me out – even unconscious – and put two and two together. I’ll see to myself, thanks.”

*After all, that’s how it’s always been.*